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ABSTRACT

Amid the growing concern with accountability of mental health service agencies, increased emphasis is being focused on program self-evaluation. Evaluation criteria involve systems management, client utilization, and outcome of intervention. In designing training for self-evaluation, one must deal with issues raised by the new audience of potential trainees and the new content areas in which skills are needed. Five gaps in current evaluation methods include the need to provide a high volume of training at little cost to participants; the need for individualized, agency-specific assistance; the ability to train persons from greatly diverse roles and background; the need for training in the social skills for managing the human side of evaluation; and the need to integrate the social interactional component of evaluation with the technical tools that are readily available. The Evaluation Curriculum Development Project developed a model of training in self-evaluation to meet these needs. It contains five basic units: (1) assessing organizational readiness for evaluation; (2) reaching consensus on the definitions of program evaluation; (3) identifying organizational prerequisites to evaluation; (4) developing an overview of the evaluation cycle; and (5) pinpointing evaluative questions to be answered. (Author/BW)

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TRAINING TO FACILITATE AGENCY SELF-EVALUATION

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Training to Facilitate Agency Self-Evaluation

Amid the growing concern with accountability of mental health service agencies, increased emphasis is being focused on one type of tool for achieving accountability -- program self-evaluation.

Self-evaluation, or internal evaluation, is defined here as evaluation that is planned, carried out, and used by persons inside the agency or system being evaluated. While the impetus to undertake the evaluation may come from outside the system, persons within the agency must be involved in evaluation planning in order to conduct self-evaluation successfully. Similarly, while outside audiences such as state or federal sponsors may also use the information, a substantial portion of the data collected must have utility for internal program planning.

The growing emphasis on agency self-evaluation in mental health is illustrated by the provisions of the Community Mental Health Center Amendments of 1975 (P.L. 94-63). Here, self-evaluation is one of three general types of evaluation required of federally funded CMHCs, and guidelines further specify three evaluative levels within the self-evaluation category: systems management, client utilization, and outcome of intervention.[1] Consider the variety of evaluation activities this involves.

At the systems management level, P.L. 94-63 requires centers to (1) evaluate the cost of operations by units of major types of direct and indirect services, (2) review the numbers and rates of catchment area residents' use of the center's services, by element of service and client age, sex, family income, race and geographic subarea, (3) define the availability of services, and (4) assess the mental health needs of persons within the catchment area. At the client utilization level, centers are asked to evaluate patterns of use of services, including (1) awareness of services by local residents, (2) acceptability of services, defined as a predeliction by residents to use and continue to use, a center, and (3) accessibility of services, defined in

terms of temporal, geographic, financial, psychological and sociocultural accessibility. The third level, outcome of intervention, designates evaluation of the impact of center services on the mental health of the residents of the catchment area. This category includes evaluation of the effectiveness and quality of both direct and indirect services; e.g., studying the impact of outpatient services on the relief of clients presenting problems, documenting effective reduction in appropriate institutionalization through referral and screening, aftercare and community placement.[2]

While some of these evaluation activities are presently being carried out by the CMHCs (activities largely in the systems management category, according to available data) many of these self-evaluation functions represent new undertakings. Often, new skills are required by persons in the field to carry out the additional evaluation-related roles and functions. The need for new skills has, in turn, created an enormous market for training in self-evaluation.

In designing training for self-evaluation, one must deal with issues raised by (1) the new audience of potential trainees and (2) the new content areas in which skills are needed. First, the nature of the training audience places demands on the content and format of self-evaluation training. Potential trainees in self-evaluation are established professionals in the mental health field, often with a wide range of expertise, albeit expertise that does not necessarily include evaluation. Nevertheless the mental health professional already possesses a range of clinical and administrative skills that can be brought to bear on evaluation as well as a knowledge of the system in which the evaluation will be carried out. The critical importance of the latter will be taken up again later in this paper. Another important consideration related to audience characteristics is the fact that evaluation is being

added onto the already full schedule of persons in the field, frequently with little or no increase in resources. These persons' concern with evaluation is not academic; it stems from a need for problem-solving to satisfy the demands of their job situations. In training, these persons understandably have little patience for learning about "evaluation" in an exhortatory sense; instead, they press for practical "how-to-do-it" instructions that they can apply to their own settings. Providing concrete instructions for designing, performing and using specific evaluations is often complicated by the variety of roles represented in the audience. As Willer points out, the audiences of self-evaluation may fill a number of roles within the agency from director to line staff or consumer.[3] Moreover, in the federally funded Centers, these roles may be carried out in the context of any of eleven service subsystems: inpatient care, outpatient care, emergency services, services to the elderly, services to children, transitional services, day care, consultation and education, screening and referral, drug abuse related services and alcohol abuse related services. In sum, the audience for training in self-evaluations is typically composed of seasoned professionals from a variety of service components and organizational roles, needing concise, practical instruction on how to plan, carry out and use specific evaluation techniques in their agencies. Meeting the training needs of these persons offers a particular challenge.

The second major consideration in designing self-evaluation training is the nature of the new content areas in which skills are needed. The task at hand is no longer evaluation done by persons outside a mental health agency, but rather building an evaluation system within, e.g., a CMHC. This shift in focus broadens the required skills considerably beyond those of

research expertise to include skills for handling the particular task of placing what have been traditionally seen as "research" activities in a context that has been traditionally devoted to service delivery, not research! To prepare for such a task, one must, for example, draw upon principles of planned change and organizational readiness for innovation, the innovation in this case being evaluation. An adequate design for self-evaluation includes not only research strategies, but strategies for overcoming organizational resistance and building support for the evaluation process. Particular managerial skills such as team-building, participative decision-making, structuring communication may be critical to the development of self-evaluation. In sum, the content areas in which persons require training for self-evaluation include both technical research skills and social-interactional skills.

Keeping in mind these characteristics of the training audience and the needed content areas, what means are currently available to develop expertise in evaluation? The Evaluation Curriculum Development Project at the University of Michigan collected close to a hundred examples of evaluation training programs, broadly defined. While the information was largely self-reported by the programs themselves and the sample is by no means inclusive, it does suggest some general descriptors of the format and content of current training. The format of training generally falls into one of five categories: (a) formal degree programs, (b) extended institutes, (c) workshops and conferences, (d) consultation to individual agencies, and (e) technical assistance through manuals, publications, etc. The number of formal degree programs available in evaluation has multiplied rapidly in recent years. While the majority of these are masters and doctoral programs, specialized training in evaluation is also available at the bachelors and postdoctoral levels.

Programs generally range in length from 2 to 4 years and are centered on university campuses. Clearly this format offers the opportunity for the extensive training in evaluation; however, it does little to increase the expertise of persons already in the field. The second format, extended institutes, attempts to provide intensive training in a reduced time frame. Professionals are brought to a university campus for 6-8 weeks of specialized training, then returned to their agencies. At least one of the summer institutes was designed to include some followup of persons' subsequent work in the field. Persons attending these programs are generally at the post-masters or post-doctorate level. Since registration in these programs is highly selective, it is also not adequate to meet the scope of training needed. The third format, workshops or conferences is by far the most common method of offering training to professionals already in the field. Workshops are generally sponsored by universities or professional groups and are held on "neutral" ground such as a hotel or convention center. Length of workshops typically ranges from 1 to 3 days. While these programs are reasonably accessible to field persons, they suffer the limitations of presenting a great deal of information in a very brief time. This task is made even more difficult by the heterogeneity of the audiences. In all of the above formats a given training audience is likely composed of persons from a variety of agencies and professional disciplines. The fourth format, consultation, moves the trainers into a particular agency context, addressing the problems or information needs of persons in that setting. The specific organization of the consultation may vary from a workshop including many or all staff to individual discussion with one or two staff. Consultations on evaluation are typically completed in one or two days, depending on the complexity of the problem being addressed and the resources available to the agency. While

consultation offers the most individualized instruction, it is often not available to agencies with limited resources. The final category, technical assistance through manuals and publications, while not "training" in a strict sense nevertheless merits attention as one of the major avenues open to persons who need to develop their evaluation expertise. NIMH has given particular attention to the written medium in providing technical assistance to CMHCs implementing P.L 94-63.[4] Literature on program evaluation has multiplied rapidly in recent years, including numerous publications that attempt to provide prescriptive steps for evaluators. Of course written training materials can only be useful if they are read, and here utilization presents some real problems. Most written materials assume a base level of knowledge that suggests to the reader why and when he/she might want to read a particular document. Lacking basic groundwork on evaluation, many persons find it difficult to begin via written materials.

The content of current training in evaluation is characterized by an emphasis on technical research skills and relative inattention to procedures for integrating evaluation activities with the ongoing operations of a service delivery agency. While individuals may become well-acquainted with specific evaluation tools, the problem of matching tools to particular agency needs and/or integrating discrete tools with one another to build a self-evaluating system often goes unaddressed by training. Moreover, the human side of evaluation -- handling resistances, gaining support from administration and cooperation from line staff, getting people to work together to plan and carry out the data collection and then actually use the information -- is largely ignored in favor of bolstering people's research skills. This content focus is consistent with the longstanding assumption that evaluation is basically a research activity. As evaluation is increasingly viewed as a management activity, evaluation training content must undergo a similar shift in focus.

In sum, when one examines the characteristics of current evaluation training methods in light of the audiences requiring training and the content areas in which information is needed, five specific gaps emerge. First, there is a need to provide a high volume of training at little cost to participants. Workshops offer one alternative for meeting this need but here a second gap emerges: the need for individualized, agency-specific assistance that can be applied directly to a given mental health setting. Third, persons from greatly diverse roles and background will be participating in the self-evaluation process but little training has attempted to prepare these sometimes "strange bedfellows" for working together. Fourth, training in social skills for managing the human side of evaluation has been almost totally neglected in deference to technical research skills. Fifth, there is a need to give agency persons a self-evaluation framework that integrates the social interactional component of evaluation with the technical tools that are already available.

The Evaluation Curriculum Development Project set out to develop a model of training in self-evaluation to meet these identified training needs. At its present stage of development, the model addresses the problems of bringing agency persons to a common starting point and providing a framework for working through the initial steps of evaluation planning as a group. The model accomplishes these tasks through five basic training units:

I. Assessing organizational readiness for evaluation

II. Reaching consensus on the definitions of program evaluation

III. Identifying organizational prerequisites to evaluation

IV. Present an overview of the evaluation cycle

V. Pinpointing evaluative questions to be answered

These training units provide a forum for learning four major types of

group activities involved in self-evaluation: (1) reaching a common group understanding of information, (2) reaching group consensus, (3) prioritizing needs as a group, and (4) group planning for action.

The first unit of the training model, assessing organizational readiness for evaluation, is not a training activity per se but an information retrieval activity. The underlying assumption here is that the development of self-evaluation requires certain descriptive information concerning the system being evaluated. One must understand where the program is starting from before beginning to build evaluation capacity. A number of models for assessing organizational readiness for evaluation are available to mental health agencies; however, one of the most informative assessments relevant to internal evaluation is that originated by Howard Davis at NIMH. Davis identified eight dimensions influencing readiness for evaluation, popularly summarized by the acronym AVICTORY: Ability, Values, Idea, Circumstances, Timing, Obligation, Resistance, Yield. The Program Evaluation Resource Center (P.E.R.C.) directed by Thomas Kiresuk has developed a quantitative instrument to assess categories of readiness within each of the AVICTORY areas. For a minimal fee, PERC will provide agency staff with copies of the instrument, score the completed questionnaires and give the agency a profile of its readiness for evaluation. These data (or comparable information obtained by an alternate means) lay the groundwork for educating staff in the process of self-evaluation.[5]

The second unit of the model, reaching consensus on the definitions of program evaluation, brings agency staff together in the first working session. Optimal group size should not exceed ten persons; therefore multiple groups would be required in large agencies. Sub-group composition might sample persons vertically or horizontally in the organizational structure. The purpose of this training unit is to focus agency staff members on the question, "What

does evaluation mean?" Structured group discussion will allow all members to view and hear responses to this general question. All group members will have the opportunity to express their thoughts on the subject. Subsequently, staff members, through a structured group consensus exercise, will develop a working definition of evaluation which is both acceptable and understandable to all members. There are a variety of definitions and purposes that can be assigned to the term, "evaluation." The unit is not intended to advocate any specific definition, but rather to encourage all members of the group to air their perceptions, biases, and opinions on the topic. A major intention of this unit is to open lines of communication between agency staff at all organizational levels and to establish the legitimate involvement of all group members in the self-evaluation process. The intragroup exchange among individuals and the airing of thoughts on the subject of evaluation is an essential part of team-building. The definitions of all agency subgroups would be summarized and fed back to the total agency. The logic of this second unit is twofold: (1) the literature and our own evaluation training experience suggest that staff members have differing conceptions of the definitions and purposes of evaluation, and that this difference can be a source of confusion and conflict. Clearing the air about the nature and purpose of self-evaluation is thus the first logical step in the group training process; and (2) the unit allows the participants to practice two group facilitators: reaching a common understanding of information and reaching group consensus.

The third unit, identifying organizational prerequisites to evaluation, first involves analyzing the results of the readiness assessment carried out in unit one. After viewing the data and sharing interpretations of the meaning of the information, participants are divided into small groups according to their job functions in the agency (e.g., "administration," and "counselling").

Each small group performs the following activities:

(1) identify the two strongest characteristics, according to the readiness profile, which will facilitate the agency's undertaking of evaluation at that point in time;

(2) identify the two weakest characteristics which will work against the agency's undertaking evaluation at the point in time; and

(3) brainstorm suggested solutions for overcoming these weak characteristics.

Participants would then reconvene in the large group in order to develop group plans for changing these characteristics. The development of group plans would be facilitated by a structured planning format. At the end of this unit, the participants will have developed their own plan for strengthening their agency's ability to undertake evaluation as well as having participated in the group processes or prioritizing needs and group planning for action.

Only after these preliminary steps have been taken to prepare agency personnel for working through self-evaluation together, should the overall evaluation process, including research procedures, be introduced. Traditional evaluation training, you will recall, begins with this unit but, in ignoring the preparatory activities, too often gives agency persons information that they are unable to use. The proposed training model avoids this pitfall by giving initial attention to organizational context. Unit four, overview of the self-evaluation cycle, then moves from a focus on process to a focus on content. First, participants are introduced to the total cycle of self-evaluation. Any of a number of stepwise evaluation procedures described in the literature could be used here. Taking as an example the evaluation process laid out by the A.D. Little manual, the steps might be:[6]

*Choose topics to evaluate

*Define the boundaries of topics to evaluate

*Design the evaluation

*Conduct the evaluation

*Analyze the evaluation data

*Present the results of the evaluation

*Enhance utilization of results

The second activity of unit four is to review the group facilitator activities that participants have practiced in units two and three. Finally, the training materials for unit four will discuss the link between the overall self-evaluation process and the group facilitator activities. The purpose here is to have participants experience the linkage between social and technical aspects of self-evaluation.

The final unit of the training model developed to date addresses the task of pinpointing evaluative questions. With this unit, participants begin to move through the technical steps of the generic evaluation cycle. The purpose of this unit is to help agency personnel identify the information they need in order to improve their programs. The objective of this module is to facilitate the use of self-evaluation results in planning and decision making by collecting information that is relevant to persons at multiple program levels. This module will provide participants with tools to gather input from the relevant subsystems of the organization (e.g., program units) concerning (1) operational goals, (2) general information needed to engage in planning and decision making vis a vis those goals, (3) types of questions to ask to gather the needed information, (4) potential information sources, and (5) how the information should be communicated to the subunit in order to be useful to those persons (preliminary input). A structured group process will be designed to facilitate communication between individuals and group management of information.

Having identified the evaluation questions that need to be answered will put the agency in a position to link with extant evaluation resource materials that focus on technical research tools.

The proposed model of training to facilitate agency self-evaluation specifically addresses the five gaps in current training previously identified. First, the model offers potential for use as a low-budget, high volume training vehicle. Since the model's stepwise format and its accompanying instructional units are self-contained, it could be used within an agency in a variety of ways. If resources are not a concern, an individual consultant could be brought in to guide agency personnel through each unit. The model is easily adaptable to a low-budget dissemination approach, however. Using a "snowball" approach, agency representatives could be introduced to the model in a centralized workshop, then returned to their agencies where they, in turn, would guide a staff group in working through each unit. In large agencies, additional groups could be led by members of the original group. Since the written materials would be made available to all staff, the role of the "leader" in each group is minimal; he/she acts more as a group facilitator than as an instructor. Potentially, this model can provide low-budget training while still addressing the second gap, the need for agency-specific assistance.

The proposed model builds on the level of readiness for evaluation of a specific agency, by collecting this information before undertaking any training. The training occurs within the agency, as with the more costly consultation model, and is directly applicable to the evaluation concerns of that setting. Persons are given a structure for beginning the actual self-evaluation planning procedure in the course of training. Third, this model is specifically designed to convene the diverse audiences that are involved in self-evaluation -- Board

members, director, middle management persons, line staff, and client consumers -- and provide a group process for bringing these persons to a common starting place and helping them to work through the initial planning stages together. Fourth, the model as presently developed, provides both instruction and experience in four social skills that serve to facilitate the self-evaluation process: (1) reaching a common group understanding of information, (2) reaching group consensus, (3) prioritizing needs as a group, and (4) group planning for action. Fifth, the model provides for the integration of the social and technical aspects of evaluation, building upon the wealth of technical tools already available.

In closing, I would like to touch briefly on some of the problems involved in evaluating an evaluation training program such as the proposed model. In a recent review of methodologies for evaluating training programs, the Evaluation Curriculum Development Project found that while most training was designed to change participants' knowledge or behavior, the majority of programs were evaluated on the basis of participant self-reported satisfaction with training. These findings are less than surprising in light of the difficulty of designing behavioral measures to evaluate training. In the model presented here, for example, one is assuming that the proposed materials and group training format will result in the participants' ability to perform certain evaluation tasks and that the performance of these tasks will in turn result in agency self-evaluation capacity. To evaluate this model, one should design behavioral measures to test the linkage between training and task performance and between task performance and self-evaluation capacity. Moreover, in order to demonstrate causality, the agencies trained under this model should be compared with control agencies who availed themselves of other types of training. (Given the current pressure to evaluate, virtually all mental health agencies are seeking some means of increasing their expertise so there is operationally no such thing as a "no-treatment" control group.)

The linkage between training and task performance can be examined by building behavioral tasks into the training itself. In the present model for example, participants demonstrate their mastery of certain group process skills in the course of completing the assignment of a given unit. The linkage between skill acquisition and self-evaluation capacity is more difficult to demonstrate. Even a minimal description of changes in self-evaluation capacity is more difficult to demonstrate. Even a minimal description of changes in self-evaluation would require longitudinal study of a number of organizational variables. Here one begins to run into questions of the cost/benefit ratio of conducting impact evaluations of training over time. Currently in evaluation training, we are trying to learn more about the shape of developing self-evaluation capacity so that we can make more intelligent judgments of what changes we would logically expect to occur in a given time period following training. Attention should be given to improving the quality of the evaluation of training hand in hand with striving to improve training content. When the impact of training on participant behavior is not assessed one should be aware of the limitations of the conclusions that can be drawn.

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